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## **Work and Workers.**

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BIBLE STUDY IN THE WOODWARD AVENUE CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH, DETROIT, MICH.

IN the effort to enlarge and elevate biblical study to its proper position in the church, there is much help in a comparison of aims and experiences. Lonely labors are hampered; co-operation means great reinforcement. In this light the simple and unfinished story of what has been done in one small corner may be a stimulus to others.

The work accomplished in the Woodward Avenue Congregational Church of Detroit has been a natural and inevitable growth from the circumstances of the case. It has been slow, and it has been checked in its development by many causes. I do not know how to give an idea of it except by the most frank and direct statement of the story.

It has always been my belief that Bible study and teaching was a very essential and central part of a minister's work, and I have acted on that principle, not by teaching classes in the Sunday school, but by affording opportunities of class-study for teachers and others interested. At the time of beginning work in Detroit, fourteen years ago, I was deeply interested in the historical method, then just becoming more accessible than before to others than specialists. It seemed wholly out of the question that one who professed to be a religious teacher, and who based his ideals on the Scriptures, should be content to let any new light escape him, or to persist in an ignorant and uninformed method of interpretation. Under the pressure of that feeling the books of the newer method of interpretation were not merely read, but were studied with constant reference to the text itself; and a somewhat minute investigation of the problems was made. The result was unexpectedly luminous and gratifying. The method approved itself, not only by its reasonableness, but by its results. A key was found which unlocked mysteries, solved enigmas, relieved the strain of countless difficulties, and tended to a unified conception of the process of divine nurture in Israel and the early church.

The next step came from the conviction that what helped the teacher must help the pupil, if it were rightly presented. There seemed to be no reason why the special student should be illuminated, and the average man and woman walk in darkness. The air at that time

was full of warnings against giving the new ideas to laymen and Sunday-school teachers; it would only confuse them, and they would in turn confuse their pupils. But it seemed to me that this depended on several things, and not least on the question whether the minister knew his Book, or had only had a gleam or two as to what the scientific study of it meant. At any rate, the venture was made; first with a small class of those who were thoroughly interested, then in more public lectures on characters and historical events, or on the new method of study. By 1894 the circumstances seemed to call for a more complete presentation of the subject, and a series of studies was planned covering the history of Israel from the exodus to the Christian era, which ran through three years. Schedules were prepared, with topics, references, and suggestions of readings from reliable works. Sometimes special topics were assigned to members of the class, to be rendered in writing. The public library kindly put on its tables in the consulting room the works needed by the class. In the course of time, by the aid of the Young People's Society and others, a small collection of the most important works was provided at the church, which was open at certain times daily.

The effect of this instruction soon became manifest in striking ways. Some who had practically given up the puzzle of Bible study, through the confusion arising from its unhistorical and unscientific method, got down their Bibles and became greatly fascinated by them. Eagerness and active effort were awakened, and the prophesied danger of shaken faith did not appear. Some from outside our own congregation, who had done enough independent work elsewhere to awaken their interest, came in to participate. Others came from an interest aroused by the prospectus sent out.

There soon followed from these studies a demand which was unexpected and in many ways unwelcome. In the latter part of 1894 the teachers in the Sunday school declared that they could not longer use the conventional lesson studies. Various changes were suggested and tried, but the dissatisfaction remained. To one of the most advanced classes a series of private lesson studies had been given which greatly quickened their interest, through the skill of a specially competent teacher. And it was not long before the call for a plan of lessons that was in harmony with the historical method became too loud to be ignored. At the cost of great labor, in addition to the work of carrying on systematic class studies as before, and trying to do the regular work of a city pastorate as well, a series of simple manuals was pre-

pared, beginning with "The Great Prophets of Israel," continued the next season by "The Spirit and Teaching of Jesus," and covering at last, in the course of five or six years, the whole historic period from the exodus to the end of the apostolic age. The motive most prominent throughout was to give the teachers the biblical material in the historic order of development. To them was referred, with some help at first, the task of adapting the scheme to the various ages and capacities of pupils. Neither the time, strength or ability of the pastor, nor the funds at hand for printer's ink, allowed any thought of a completely graded system of studies. It was hoped that in time this might be procured from other sources, when the demand for improved methods should necessitate the production of helps.

As to the effect of the change in the school, it was distinctly felt to be an advance. Teachers and scholars awoke to fresh interest. Some fine work was done in the higher grades; better attention to the lesson was secured from the younger pupils. There were exceptions, but that was the general result. Especially it became evident that a more competent and far more interested corps of teachers had been secured, in whose hands the newly arranged material could be intelligently and effectively used. The question so deeply involved in all plans for the betterment of Sunday-school work had been solved. But it had taken five years of pastoral teaching, advancing from step to step toward the frank and full adoption of scientific methods, to produce this result. We have no discoveries to reveal of any quick and easy methods of teaching teachers to teach. Much still remains to be done. Much cannot be done by any man or any church alone.

The approach to a really graded course in the school has been more difficult and has thus far only had a beginning. Against it have stood the force of custom, the advantages of the uniform lesson, the lack of sympathy here and there, the voluntary nature of the Sunday school both as to attendance and study, the absence of home co-operation, the short session once a week, and the uncertainty of continuance in the course that might be mapped out. But a beginning has been made; the uniform lesson has gone; and some steps have been taken toward such an apportionment of topics and studies as has been for some time held in mind. Other lesson schemes, other steps in organization, and other instruction in pedagogy and child-knowledge are greatly needed.

The work of advanced teaching has developed meantime, finally settling itself into a Sunday afternoon lecture with opportunities for

questions and suggestions. It has taken up such studies as "The Career of Jesus as a Development," "The Evolution of Christianity," "The Effect of Scientific Study on the Literature, History, Ethics, and Religion of Israel," "The Hebrew Legends of the Prime," and others.

The story of what has been attempted here is not given from any sense of satisfaction with the accomplishment, but only to illustrate some things that can be done under difficult circumstances and when people are only feeling their way, without outside help or co-operation, toward better things. Some lessons of our struggle are clear to me; *e. g.*, that the work of training teachers must precede everything; that no pastor will succeed in doing that effectively by any superficial reading or by the adoption of "advanced" ideas merely, but only by tireless and patient examination of the text itself "to see whether these things are so;" that the widely prevalent and much-cultivated fear of unsettling the minds of students by fair and honest and competent teaching is a sheer "bug-a-boo"; that the method of reconciliation and mediation which seeks to make the old method and the new ride the same horse, only brings both to the ground and produces the very skepticism it seeks to avoid; that the utmost frankness and the most uncompromising adoption of the best-established results of historical study, when given with the reasons which substantiate them, are likely to receive respectful attention and lead to real study and ripening conclusions. If one is neither stampeded by criticism nor tempted to bitter retort, he will find that in time the resolve to give only the best will justify itself.

In conclusion a word may be said as to plans and ideas of unification and classification of studies which are not yet realized, but a hint of which may count in the current discussions. The grading of a school is not likely to be an easy task except under very unusual conditions. It is hampered, as I have shown in the case of our own school, by many difficulties. Yet in the interest of the real teaching of religion, some graded method is too important to be dismissed because it is difficult. Gradually—especially, I am confident, with the help of the newly organized Religious Education Association—something definite will be effected. Doubtless there will still have to be in most schools some ungraded classes to catch newcomers, temporary pupils, and others who are not ready for graded studies. But that should not prevent the grading of such a part of the school as can be so handled.

I have always felt that the double problem of the Sunday school

and the "second service" might find its natural and fruitful solution in a second service in the afternoon devoted to instruction, which should include both younger and older students, and should open with brief but dignified worship, with choir, organ, and minister, in the church itself; the classes of every type then scattering to their work in places adapted to their several needs. There is need of giving to the teaching work the same dignity and honor that is given to the preaching service.

Then, as to a general scheme of grading, there should be, first of all, the kindergarten, to be worked on the real kindergarten method, but with a more definite adaptation of that method to religious instruction. Next, a primary department with a two-years' course, in which the biblical and other appropriate stories should be made the chief vehicle of practical teaching about life as it is. Third, an intermediate grade of children from, say, eight to twelve years old, where the more systematic study of the Bible should begin, initiated by a study of Jesus' own teaching and life as a standard for all future reference; and going back in the second year to the study of ancient Israel from the exodus to the prophets. In the fourth or junior grade the studies might take up the prophetic era and the story of Judaism to the Christian era. In the senior classes I have felt that there should be a study, by a careful and critical use of Jesus' teaching, of Christian principles and their application—as a preparation for definite personal decisions and the entrance into church membership—followed by a study of the genesis of the church in the apostolic age.

For the passage from grade to grade it would be well to have certificates given on the basis of the recommendation of the teacher; and the appeal of this to the self-respect and efficiency of the pupil might be an effective correction of the hereditary indisposition of the pupil to study in the Sunday school as he does in the day school.

There are endless questions which I have not touched, concerning psychologic and pedagogic problems and the constant use of the most effective of all forces, the personality of the teacher. Others can treat these subjects, which are of radical importance, far better than I can. I have only tried to present that aspect of the new development of church teaching which has grown out of the definite experience of one church. For one thing I am devoutly thankful; that the period of lonely, isolated work is passing, and the day of fuller intercourse and wider co-operation is dawning.

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